



ZECHARIAH FINDS HIS VOICE

December 9, 2018, Second Sunday of Advent

Luke 1:67-80

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Remarkably, the Gospel of Luke opens not with the birth of Jesus, but with the birth of John. Then, in parallel columns, the first chapter lays out the unlikely beginnings of both cousins. Their stories bear similarities worth noting—both births are unexpected, though for different reasons. Both parents, one an aging priest and the other a young woman, are shocked by a visit from the angel Gabriel, who terrifies Zechariah as much as he terrified Mary. Gabriel delivers the same message to each parent-to-be, “Don’t be afraid. You are going to have a son. This is all God’s idea and he has already picked out the baby’s name.” Then Mary sings in praise of God, and so does Zechariah, belting out, in his aging baritone, a song of his own. With that, chapter one of Luke comes to a close.

Despite their prominence in Luke’s first chapter, my friend Agnes Norfleet notes that Zechariah and Elizabeth are “peripheral characters” in the Christmas story.¹ It’s true, isn’t it? They aren’t included in our manger sets and no one portrays them in the children’s pageant. Yet the Christmas story, so pregnant with possibility, begins with them. Their lineage is impressive: Zechariah is a priest in the line of Abijah and Elizabeth can trace her ancestry all the way back to Aaron. Both of them, we are told, are as faithful as the day is long. Both respected for their righteousness. And both pitied, too, getting on in years as they were without a son to carry on Zechariah’s name....

Once the story takes that turn, we already know where things are headed. Whenever the Bible highlights a couple that is getting on in years and cannot have a child, a couple over whom the page lingers and the text calls by name...we might as well get a gift for the baby shower and sign them up for Lamaze classes.



Abraham and Sarah...Hannah and Elkanah...Zechariah and Elizabeth. It can seem that the Bible makes such miracles seem commonplace, but they are not, we know. Then, as now, there are so many more whose stories go another way...the way of living with a hope unfulfilled...the way of finding meaning and joy by other means...the way of waiting and tests and uncertainty.

Unlike Sarah and Hannah's stories, Luke tells this story from the father's experience. We hear how Zechariah is in the temple, on active duty with his priestly team, as he has done his entire working life. This year he finally gets chosen to be the one sent into the inner sanctuary to handle the incense and prayers at the big festival.

His moment in the spotlight has finally come! Outside, a large crowd waits. Inside, Zechariah is terrified to find an angel standing by the Bic lighter. Fortunately, it is the way of angels to bring news of great joy. This news is indeed astounding, unexpected, and life changing: Elizabeth will conceive and bear a son who will be great in God's eyes. These parents of impressive lineage will have a son who will be a new Elijah! Their son will turn the hearts of parents to their children, the disobedient to the wisdom of the faithful, and make ready a people for the Lord! Imagine it: one minute you are downsizing for a condo in a retirement community and the next you are adding a wing for a nursery! Zechariah exhibits an uncharacteristic, momentary lapse of faith, asking, "Umm, how will I know this is true?"

With that question, Gabriel decides that the promised son may make ready a people, but at the moment he clearly needs to make ready this father-to-be. Gabriel pulls himself to full angel-height, whatever that is, and says in the most authoritative voice an angel is allowed to have: "Look, I am Gabriel, okay? I stand in the presence of God! I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this news. This is good news, by the way! For disbelieving this one time in your life, you are hereby rendered mute for the next nine months!" Zechariah stumbled out of the sanctuary. The crowd grew silent, but so was he. All he could do was gesture and motion and go home. Imagine trying to explain all of this wordlessly to Elizabeth!



(“here’s the church” hands...points at himself, then makes flapping wing sign...points to her and then makes a rounded belly sign). No doubt Elizabeth replied: (Roll eyes and make crazy sign).

Yet it all happened, just as Gabriel said it would. Their baby was born and everyone was excited to greet little Zechariah the IV. But relatives and neighbors were shocked to find out that this baby would not carry on the family name. Instead, God had picked out a brand new name because God had picked out a brand new future—not just for the Zechariahs but for everyone else, too. ‘His name is John,’ Elizabeth said. Zechariah backed her up, writing “John” in capital letters on a tablet since he still couldn’t make a sound.

There is, I think, something more than comedic going on in this detail of Zechariah’s story. Zechariah is forced into a time of silence and waiting and I am not convinced it was punishment as much as it was meant as a gift. A gift of silent time to ponder the mystery of how God is at work in his life. A time to sit quietly with faith and doubt side by side. A time to consider his weighty heritage, past, and tradition and then to shake free enough from that in order to welcome the new name and new future God would soon place in his arms.

John Buchanan, retired pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, once told of a feature item he saw in a newspaper. It was something about a “Quiet Christmas Club.” The QCC (Quiet Christmas Club) had two simple rules:

1. No more complaining about how busy you are, how rushed and tired and overwhelmed you are from the responsibilities of the season.
2. Quiet. Every day set aside a time of silence to ponder and to pray, to thank God for your blessings, your loved ones, your past in all of its happiness and sorrow. Silence. Time to ponder the mystery of God, God’s coming into the world in the birth of a baby. Time to ponder how God is calling you to live in new ways in order to live into the new future God makes possible.ⁱⁱ



Joining the Quiet Christmas Club may be just what we need to make ourselves ready.

Once Zechariah confirmed that he would give his child a new name—a name that signaled God’s new future with God’s astonishing advent into the world—Zechariah found his voice. Nine months of silence filled Zechariah with such joy and hope that the words poured out in exuberant gratitude to the God who is able to change everything, even us.

Zechariah’s song begins with the past, singing verb after verb that recount the mighty acts of God. But Zechariah does not stay in the past. He moves to the present then, reminding us of the ways we are to live before God in grateful response. Then...Zechariah continued to sing, in a quieter voice, of the ways his son would make us ready to receive the Messiah. And surely it is our work also to do: to ‘go before the Lord, prepare his way, teach salvation and offer forgiveness. By the end of the song, old Zechariah could barely make any sound at all above the lump in his throat...as he looked into his tiny child’s face through tears...yet he was determined to express something more—the deep joy and gladness and hope he felt as he gazed at the future in his arms. Zechariah sang, softly now, of the tender mercy of God...of the dawn that will break upon us...and it was no more than a whisper when he sang of the light that finds even those who sit in darkness and those passing through the shadow of death. Zechariah’s voice trailed off, placing his hope in the One who will guide our feet in the way of peace.

In the busy-ness and noise and festivities of this season, Zechariah and Elizabeth invite us to stand with them in the quiet spaces around the periphery and to make our hearts ready for the newness God brings.

Amen.

ⁱ Agnes W. Norfleet, “Peripheral Angels” in *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2010, 13-15.

ⁱⁱ John Buchanan, “Zechariah and Elizabeth,” preached at The Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago on December 3, 2006.